



Park & Recreation Commission

Department of Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities
1108 Jefferson Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

June 24, 2021

Honorable Mayor and members of City Council
City of Alexandria
301 King Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

RE: Park & Recreation Commission Concerns Regarding NOVA Parks Management of Cameron Run Regional Park

The Parks and Recreation Commission writes to address concerns about the current management as well as the future of Cameron Run Regional Park (the "Park"). In light of recent reports and input from members of the public at our May 20 Park & Recreation Commission meeting, we are very concerned about the apparent carelessness of NOVA Parks in its management of the Cameron Run Regional Park and question whether NOVA Parks has met its obligations in the current contract with the City for this space. Further, the Commission is concerned that NOVA Parks action (or inaction) related to events described below may constitute a breach of its contract with the City. As a result, the Commission recommends that City Council direct the City Attorney to further investigate the incident.

News reports in April 2021 cited that some 150 fish and a bird were killed due to excessive chlorine entering Lake Cook in Alexandria, which is adjacent to the Park, and that the Fire Marshal's Office issued a notice of violation for this illegal discharge.¹ Additional eyewitness reports cited that a hose was run under a fence and attached to the pump house allowing the pool water to drain towards Lake Cook (see Appendix A, which includes a photo of a blue hose extruding out from

¹ See *VA Patch*, [Lake Contamination Kills Fish, Bird In Alexandria | West End Alexandria, VA Patch](https://www.alexandriava.gov/news_display.aspx?id=122337) (Emily Leayman, May 17, 2021), visited on June 15, 2021; also see, City of Alexandria Responds to Lake Cook Contamination, https://www.alexandriava.gov/news_display.aspx?id=122337, visited on June 15, 2021.

under the fence and water spilling out on the day of the most recent fish kill). This Commission previously expressed concerns about the use of the Park and whether it best served the needs of Alexandria when NOVA Parks had sought to extend their lease (see Appendix B). At that time, the Commission also cited the lack of proper enforcement mechanisms for maintenance issues in the NOVA Parks contract.

Based on these reports, we recommend that City Council direct the City Attorney to review and report on the following items:

- (a) Review the existing contract with NOVA Parks and identify NOVA Park's responsibilities for the care of land, water, and other natural resources within the boundaries of, and immediately adjacent to, Cameron Run Regional Park;
- (b) Identify any provisions in the contract that may have been breached by NOVA Parks related to its handling of this most recent incident of chemicals seeping into Lake Cook and the surrounding watershed;
- (c) Identify any past citations or notices of violations that NOVA Parks has received related to the Park and describe any actions taken by NOVA Parks to rectify each citation/violation, if any;
- (d) Investigate whether NOVA Parks, by any action or inaction -- -- whether intentional or inadvertent -- has violated state or federal environmental statutes; and
- (e) Identify all legal remedies available to the City to address NOVA Parks failure to comply with any contract terms that were breached and/or failure to prevent this most recent illegal discharge into Lake Cook.

The Commission looks forward to reviewing the responses you receive to the above. Consistent with the previous recommendations of this Commission, we believe that the highest and best long-term use of Cameron Run Regional Park is as a recreational facility or complex that provides year-round active, and passive uses where needs are currently unmet within the City of Alexandria. As a reference, please see the letter written by the Commission to City Council regarding this subject dated October 5, 2018 (Appendix B).

The short-term extension of the contract with NOVA Parks, approved by City Council in 2018, was contingent on a planning process being put in place to consider future uses. We understand that funding is approved in the FY 2025 Capitol Improvement budget to complete a comprehensive land use plan for this City property. To the extent that NOVA Parks has violated any provision in its lease, we believe that agreement should be revisited in advance of its expiration -- including whether the City should take further legal action against NOVA Parks, as provided in the contract or pursuant to any other available legal remedy.

The Commission looks forward to continuing to work with City Council to ensure that we make the best use of available lands in the City to meet the recreation needs of our residents and visitors and to ensure that our public spaces are well cared for.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to the Commission if we can further advise on this issue.

Sincerely,



Gina Baum
Chair
Parks and Recreation Commission



Dana R. Colarulli
Planning District II
Parks and Recreation Commission

cc: Park & Recreation Commission members
Mark Jinks, City Manager
Debra Collins, Deputy City Manager
Joanna Anderson, City Attorney
James Spengler, Director, Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities
Jack Browand, Acting Deputy Director, Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities

Appendix A: Photos

Appendix B: Park and Recreation Commission Letter October 5, 2018

Appendix A: Photos



Fig 1. Blue hose extruding under the Fence and discharging water.



Fig 2. Water Flowing away from the Nova Parks facility eventually seeping into Lake Cook.

Park and Recreation Commission City of Alexandria



Date: October 5, 2018

Mayor Allison Silberberg
Vice Mayor Justin Wilson
Councilman Willie F. Bailey
Councilman John T. Chapman
Councilman Timothy B. Lovain
Councilwoman Redella S. "Del" Pepper
Councilman Paul C. Smedberg

Re: Cameron Run Regional Park

Dear Mayor and Members of Council:

The Park and Recreation Commission writes in support of the proposed short-term lease extension at Cameron Run. However, in doing so we emphasize – as we consistently have done – that this park cannot stay as it is and must transform to serve the whole city. The approval of a short lease extension should not cause the city to rest. Indeed, we strongly recommend that a planning process for the future of Cameron Run begin immediately.

As you are aware, the Commission found the current lease not in the best interests of the City of Alexandria because the limited seasonal use leaves the park unavailable for the majority of the year and neither the lease nor the seasonal use provides revenue to the city. The Commission further found that the highest and best use of Cameron Run Regional Park would be a recreational facility or complex providing year-round active and passive uses where needs are currently unmet. This could include, but is not limited to, natural areas, walking trails, aquatics, indoor or outdoor fields, multi-use courts, and community gathering spaces.

The Commission recommended that Council and city staff make a plan for the future of this park, including planning for year-round uses in the short-, medium-, and long-term. We emphasized that any lease of this property must generate revenue for the city and must be limited in duration to allow maximum flexibility for changing uses over time. We likewise emphasized that the city should engage in short-term off-season uses that would generate revenue to be reinvested in the park and seek partnerships and contributions for the transformation of the park. Finally, we expressed the desire that any extension include express provisions to facilitate the transition of the park to ensure transition within the next ten years.

While the proposed short-term extension is far from perfect, it does provide for some activation of the space in the off-season, expands some uses to meet community needs in the immediate future, and provides for the possibility of some revenue to the city. It also properly includes mechanisms for ensuring that off-season uses, community uses, and repairs to the site occur quickly. Finally, it provides the immediate neighboring community the comfort of a dedicated maintenance person to address what has been up to now poor maintenance and poor communication.

While a majority of the Commission voted in favor of the plan because of its promise of immediate upgrades and year-round uses, we did so while expressing the following:



- There needs to be continued communication between the city and NOVA Parks. The lease agreement should not be viewed as a ceiling on activities and uses at the park, but a floor. We encourage both entities to continue the monthly meetings that have happened during this negotiation process throughout the duration of the lease. We encourage both NOVA Parks and the City to be creative in activating the site for all users.
- The city and NOVA Parks should work together to ensure that the fee structure for the “Learn to Swim” program is consistent with city provided programs, including the provision for financial aid. The point of meeting community needs at this site is to meet the needs of the whole community.
- We continue to believe that this site should generate revenue for the city rather than continuing to fill the coffers of NOVA Parks and continue to emphasize that any revenue gained from this park should be reinvested in this park, whether immediately or in its ultimate transformation.
- We encourage City Council to take the lead in creating a vision for the transformation of this park to a park that serves the Alexandria of the future.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Atkins

Chair, Park and Recreation Commission